

WHERE HAVE ALL THE CHILDREN GONE?

by

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May, 2011

COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 48

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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It is a scene most of us have witnessed at one time or another – masses of children toting their backpacks full of books, pencils, and other school supplies, taking part in the centuries-old institution of heading off to school in the morning. At midday, younger children play in the schoolyard, while older children gather to socialize with friends during lunch. The chaos recurs in the afternoon, as children pour out of school and excitedly rush home at the end of the day. Imagine instead, a world where there are no schools and there are few, if any, children in sight. What type of horrible development could cause such a catastrophic outcome? The Internet!

Education and the Internet

The Internet has been in existence for more than 50 years; in the last 20, public use and access has grown exponentially. Many industries, such as banking and communications, have improved performance and efficiency through advances in information technology. This includes remote real-time personal interaction, infinite research resources and global 24-hour access to information and people. Yet, the prevailing education system in the United States for kindergarten through twelfth grade students has not significantly adapted to these advances or taken advantage of the opportunities they offer. In fact, the current education system functions essentially as it has for well over a century – a teacher instructs a group of students in a classroom, using various instructional materials, such as paper, pencils, and textbooks.

Until now, the education system has seen minimal movement toward using the Internet to broaden its reach and increase efficiency. In 2003-04, only 10% of all primary or secondary public schools had students enrolled in distance education courses (Zandberg, Lewis & Greene,

2008). Various barriers, such as course accreditation requirements and copyright laws, limit digital content in education (Levin & Kane, 2010). Additionally, real technological change substitutes capital for labor, disrupting the existing job structure. In education, that could mean a loss of employment for teachers.

Powerful teachers' unions actively work to block reforms that create systematic change and threaten teachers' livelihood (Chubb, Moe, & Cuban, 2009). Online distance learning programs also present questions about school funding. Since schools have historically been funded based on student attendance, or "seat time," new funding structures would have to be created to account for online distance learners to incorporate such programs into the educational system. Because of these barriers, the education system has welcomed technology only to the extent that it fits into its current structure, rather than using technology to create a new model and truly change how it operates (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). Nevertheless, the future potential and value of online distance learning programs is widely recognized.

In its *National Educational Technology Plan 2010*, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology identifies creating "efficient and effective online learning systems" as critical to design and implement a more effective education system (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2010). In its National Broadband Plan, the Federal Communications Commission lists as one of its three primary recommendations in the field of education as "support and promote online learning" (Federal Communications Commission). Advantages of online distance learning programs include customized curricula, teaching methods, and schedules; fewer geographical constraints; greater availability of subject matter experts; opportunities to use assessment data for continuous improvement; cost-effectiveness; and reduced environmental impact (Chubb, Moe, & Cuban,

2009; Federal Communications Commission; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2010; Stasiw, 2010). Online distance learning can reach and level the playing field for those typically underserved by, or at a disadvantage in, the conventional school environment. This includes those in rural areas, of lower socioeconomic status, or with physical or learning disabilities, victims of bullying, or social outcasts (Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Although research is limited, it has shown that there is no significant difference between the effectiveness of online education compared to face-to-face learning (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005).

In light of these advantages, online distance learning programs in primary and secondary schools are increasing in popularity. The number of K-12 students enrolled in online courses in the United States in 2007-08 is estimated at 1,030,000, a 47% increase from 2005-06 (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) estimates that over 1.5 million K-12 students were engaged in online and blended learning for the 2009-10 school year (Wicks, 2010), and every indication is that this growth will continue into the foreseeable future (Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, the education system in the United States is facing three major crises – the growth in demand for global skills outpacing educational attainment, declining revenues for education and a looming teacher shortage – that are poised to force the education system into even greater expansion of distance learning programs (Wise & Rothman, 2010). As online programs continue to proliferate, teachers will become more geographically dispersed and less in demand, the organizational power of teachers' unions will weaken and real systematic change will be allowed to occur (Chubb, Moe, & Cuban, 2009).

Online learning programs are expected to significantly change the landscape of the education system within the next decade. The Sloan Consortium estimates that by the year 2016, online enrollments could reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 students (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). In *Disrupting Class: How Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, the authors predict that by 2016 about one-quarter of high school courses will be online. By the year 2019, this percentage will increase to one-half (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008).

Online distance learning and socialization

Socialization is defined as “the process by which a human being beginning at infancy acquires the habits, beliefs, and accumulated knowledge of society through education and training for adult status” (Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary, 2007). Traditionally, children acquire socialization skills in elementary school through interactions with teachers and peers (Tasmajian, 2002). Home schooling and online distance learning programs, by their nature, do not provide students with regular face-to-face contact with teachers or other students. A home-schooled or online student stays home and works alone or with a parent or caregiver, instead of leaving the home, attending school, and personally interacting with teachers and other children. Even so, researchers have found that there is no significant difference in the social skills of students who are home schooled, as compared to traditionally educated children (Sivin-Kachala & Bialo, Evaluation of the Social Skills of Full-time, Online Public School Students, 2009; Stough, 1992).

While home schooling is generally limited to personal interactions with parents and siblings within the home, online distance learning programs frequently involve remote interaction with one or more teachers and, optionally, other students. Children participating in

online programs also have more frequent opportunities than conventionally educated or home-schooled children to communicate with others online and can benefit from these interactions.

The millennial generation, or Generation Y, the generation born from 1980 onward, was brought up using digital technology and mass media (Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon). “Millenials” do not feel isolated by technology; to the contrary, technology is a means of social connection through text messaging and online social networking (Gibbs, 2010). Children accustomed to, even more comfortable with, online social relationships as compared to face-to-face interactions, have opportunities to establish much wider social circles than the traditional student does.

Rafael Herrera, Director of Admissions and Lecturer for the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley, suggests that online learning programs also provide opportunities for students who are less socially active. The computer provides a “shield” for them, allowing them to participate and interact more, possibly improving their self-esteem and their ability to feel counted (interview comment in panel discussion, April 26, 2010).

Notwithstanding concerns about social isolation experienced by online distance learning students, existing research shows that students enrolled in online schools are at least as well socialized as equivalent students enrolled in traditional schools (Sivin-Kachala & Bialo, Social Skills of Mainstream Students in Full-Time, Online Public Schools: How They Compare to Traditional Public School Students, 2009). Using digital media, youth are able to pick up basic social and technological skills they need to fully participate in society (Ito, et al., 2008).

The comparison, however, may not be so simple. The socialization experience of an online distance learning program or home-schooled student depends heavily on many factors, including the characteristics of the student, the teacher, and the learning program (Irwin &

Berge, 2006). Creating an equivalent, albeit different, social experience for the student is critical to counteracting the isolating effect of online distance learning (Barbour & Plough, 2009).

Home-schooled student Rebecca Hunt believes that a home-schooled child's parents and family are the primary determinant of the child's ability to develop social skills and build relationships (interview comment in panel discussion, April 26, 2010). Opportunities for social interaction, such as online social networks, community involvement, or sports activities, also play a vital role in the development of social skills. The research may also be misleading when speculating about the effect on children should online distance learning programs become the norm in the education system.

With traditional schooling currently being the "default" education system, it is logical to conclude that the relatively small percentage of parents who voluntarily choose to home school their children or enroll them in online distance learning programs are those who take an above-average interest in their children's education needs. Theoretically, these parents would also be more likely to make the effort to involve their children in community activities, sports programs, or other social opportunities to develop their social skills. If online distance learning programs become the default, however, parents who take little to no interest in their children's education will likely fail to purposefully involve their children in the interactive activities needed to develop their social skills. It is possible that a generation of children will grow up with social skills deficit, a condition associated with later criminality, mental disorders, and substance abuse (Boisjoli, Vitaro, Lacourse, Barker, & Tremblay, 2007; Jewell, Jordan, Hupp, & Everett, 2009), which brings this issue squarely to the future of policing.

Significance for Law Enforcement

School age children make up a considerable proportion of the communities law enforcement agencies serve. Children under the age of 18 comprise 26% of the population of California and 24.6% of the population nationwide (United States Census Bureau, 2009). The growth of online distance learning programs is altering the education system in a way that could significantly change how police departments serve this segment of the population.

Currently, many law enforcement agencies have a contractual relationship with their local school district for on-campus School Resource Officers. Their purpose is typically to provide safety and security on campus through law enforcement, law-related counseling, and law-related education (Center for the Prevention of School Violence). As online distance learning programs take students away from brick-and-mortar schools, issues such as assaults and thefts between students and around schools will no longer require the services of these officers. The reduction or closure of traditional schools could allow police departments to redirect resources previously dedicated to schools toward other crime prevention or law enforcement needs.

As noted, a preponderance of online distance learning programs could potentially lead to social skills deficits in a large percentage of children. Law enforcement could help offset these deficiencies by creating and implementing programs focused on the development of proper social skills at younger ages, similar to how Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programs target substance abuse. These programs would require an upfront outlay of financial and labor resources by police departments, but it would be an investment in the future to help keep children from falling into criminal activity later in life.

In today's technology-based environment, it is difficult for parents to deny their children access to computers or other communication devices, at home or in less controlled locations,

such as schools or public libraries. Traditionally, school and neighborhood friends determined a child's peer culture, but as online distance learning programs grow, the legitimate need for children to be online unsupervised will increase, as will their risk for being influenced by the abundance of online sources that advocate criminal pursuits, such as pedophilia, drugs, and hate groups (Bowker, 1999). This is another area in which law enforcement will have an expanding role.

Computer-based methods of committing crimes, such as cyber-bullying, identity theft, and fraud have already created a new arena to which law enforcement agencies must dedicate resources. These crimes are bound to broaden and increase as computer use further expands at all ages. Children are especially at risk for not just falling victim to, but committing these crimes. Young people today are more technologically advanced than ever before, making it possible for them to commit offenses disproportionately serious for their age. They also seem to have an "ethical deficit" related to computer crimes, somehow perceiving online crimes as being less serious than traditional crimes (DeMarco, 2001). The Federal Bureau of Investigations, the United States Department of Justice, and the United States Department of Education have already made efforts to instill appropriate computer behavior in our youth to prevent them from gravitating into computer delinquency (Bowker, 1999). Local law enforcement can join in this effort by initiating education programs within their own school districts that focus on computer crime and ethics.

The investigation and prosecution of computer crimes are challenging because of difficulties in determining jurisdiction, obtaining electronic evidence, and tracing back to the electronic wrongdoer (Bowker, 1999; DeMarco, 2001). New legislation or new technology that clarifies jurisdictional ambiguity, allows greater latitude for electronic evidence collection, and

facilitates the identification of electronic sources will significantly improve law enforcement officers' ability to investigate these crimes. Law enforcement must be active in the legislative process and agencies should position themselves on the forefront of technology to take advantage of these new developments.

Until these changes come about, police departments must dedicate resources to the investigation of computer-related crimes and realize that children are the key to combating this trend. Many agencies already make use of social media sites to disseminate information to their communities, and use these connections to solicit information. In May 2010, Facebook had more than 12 million users in the United States under the age of 18; a number growing at 3% per month (Eldon, 2010). In fact, 15% of all social network users are under 18 years of age (Pingdom, 2010). Law enforcement agencies can use these outlets to establish two-way communication with young people, especially as online distance learning programs become more popular and fewer children assemble at a central location.

Finally, if online distance learning, through its customized programs and freedom from geographical constraints, can reach and successfully educate a greater number of students who would not otherwise be served by the traditional system, it can result in greater high school graduation rates. Since research shows that schooling and education significantly reduces criminal activity (Lochner & Moretti, 2003), a better-educated population would likely result in a reduction in crime rates.

Conclusion

Online distance learning programs have placed the education system in the United States on the brink of major change. While the nexus to law enforcement may not be readily apparent,

the downstream effect can be significant. Children make up one-quarter of the population and are the future adults in their communities. Serving their needs certainly demands the attention of local policing agencies. If police departments dedicate resources to programs geared toward children, such as assisting in developing social skills and educating on the dangers of computer interactions, they can have a positive impact on the future of crime in their communities.

As Roxanne Jablonski-Liu, Director of Assessment in Elementary Instruction at the Fremont Unified School District in California, points out, “Kids, from a very, very young age, are inundated with electronic media” and online distance learning takes advantage of the technical platform to which they are already accustomed. “Giving kids various ways to access education may actually in the long run decrease their chances of having negative interactions with the police...because they will have access to other things beyond just what we do in the K-12 system” (interview comment in panel discussion, April 26, 2010). Online distance learning programs can provide additional options, better serve, or simply reach, children who are not ideally fit for the traditional school system, resulting in a more educated and less criminal society.

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